

ORAL STATEMENT of Deputy Director Steve Martin
Subcommittee on National Parks, House Committee on Resources
The National Park Service Organic Act and its Implementation through Daily Park Management

December 14, 2005

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before your subcommittee at this oversight hearing on “The National Park Service Organic Act and Its Implementation through Daily Park Management.”

I am a 30-year veteran of the NPS having served as a ranger, resource manager, superintendent, Regional Director and Deputy Director. I am here on behalf of the Director to testify and answer questions. I have summarized my testimony and will submit the full document for the record. Also, with me today are members of our leadership counsel and park superintendents.

Through the establishment of Yellowstone and other early parks, Congress set the course for a rich American legacy. The Organic Act of 1916 secured this new conservation direction by creating a National Park Service with a resource protection goal. The National Parks are often cited as “the best idea America ever had.”

The National Park Service is proud to carry out the mission entrusted to us by the Organic Act. We, and the Department of Interior, would like to reaffirm our support for the Act. The Organic Act directs the NPS to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for their enjoyment in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. From Old Faithful to Denali, from the National Mall to Chaco Culture—the National Park System preserves our Nation’s most important places, stories and heritage.

The enjoyment and use of these areas is fundamental to our mission.. The parks play an important role in contributing to the physical and mental well-being of our citizens and international visitors. The parks also play an important role in the economy.

What has made all of this possible is the Organic Act. It creates a mission with several components, the key to which is that future generations will be able to enjoy National Park System resources only if we successfully protect them from impairment. We think this makes good sense.

The ability of an agency to meet a mission like this lies with its willingness to examine its management practices and update them to more effectively fulfill its mission. The National Park Service is now involved in such an exercise.

The draft revision of the Management Policies recognizes new challenges facing the National Park Service such as border security, fiscal restraints, urban encroachment, and the relationships between parks and local communities. The draft is currently available for 120 day public and employee review.

The draft policies adhere to several key tenets. They must comply with all laws, regulations, and Executive Orders; prevent impairment; ensure appropriate uses are embraced including visitor services, interpretation, and facility maintenance; ensure that the responsibility for decision-making remains with agency; improve business practices; emphasize greater consultation and cooperation with local, state and Federal entities and the public to reach

sustainable decisions; encourage consistency across the National Park System; and Ensure that parks are passed on to future generations in better condition than they are today.

The world is changing, and we continue to strive for clarity in how we communicate to managers the important provisions of the organic act and the no-impairment standard. This means increasing the understanding of “appropriate use” and making sure that this part of the mission is not overlooked. Providing “clarity of guidance” means keeping the key management decisions in the hands of the managers by better defining “professional judgment.” This means not managing our parks in isolation but working with others and engaging them in cooperative conservation.

The concept of impairment is critical. Impairment is not the same thing as impact—any activities, no matter how benign, have some impact on resources or values. Impairment, however, is reached when the severity, duration, timing and the affects of an impact harm the integrity of the park unit. This can be through one impact or the accumulation of different impacts. To prevent impairment park managers must understand not only the organic act but all of the laws that pertain to the park, especially its enabling legislation that sets key parameters for its unique resources and unique opportunities to enjoy them. They must also have good information and follow a public process. The ability to provide for enjoyment of resources is part of the National Park Service fundamental mission but when a conflict arises between conserving park resources and values and providing for their enjoyment, preservation is predominant.

In 1925, Stephen T. Mather, the first Director of the National Park Service, agreed by saying, “The primary duty of the National Park Service is to protect the national parks... and keep them as nearly in their natural state as this can be done in view of the fact that access to them must be provided in order that they may be used and enjoyed.” This statement of Mather’s recognizes that it is of tremendous importance to allow appropriate access to the parks, but it is of utmost importance to protect them.

In summary, the Organic Act continues to be the foundation for all of our management actions. It has had a profound impact on park management because it consistently fosters quality in the way we manage the National Park System. The Organic Act, implemented through National Park Service Management Policies and Director’s Orders, sets a high standard that inspires and informs all of our management decisions.

It has stood the test of time and has transcended many Congresses, Administrations, population changes and environmental challenges. I am confident that it will continue to be dynamic and useful for the next century and beyond.